Odio recommends razing Marine Stadium

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City Manager Cesar Odio has recommended Marine Stadium be demolished and replaced with a multi-use waterfront facility, a proposal he will proffer publicly for the first time Tuesday during a 9 a.m. meeting in the city commission chambers, 3500 Pan American Drive.

If commissioners agree, the stadium, home for 30 years to hydroplane and powerboat racing, prize fights, rowing regattas, concerts and Easter Services, will be razed.

"I love the place," said Odio, a member of the Miami Rowing Club, which sits at the far end of the property and would not be affected by the demolition. "I go there every day of my life when I can.

"But the reality is that, for the number of times Marine Stadium is used, we need a facility that is of more economic benefit to the city. I think there are things we can do to derive funds while maintaining a facility for public use."

Odio favors a smaller amphitheater and related watersports facility that would not preclude boat racing, rowing or waterbike riding. City development director Jack Luft, who endorses the idea, says the complex also could include an Olympic-caliber training center for canoeists, kayakers and sailors and a facility for water-skiing shows and other marine-related entertainment.

Marine Stadium has been idle since Hurricane Andrew — although an engineering appraisal of the structure found no serious hurricane damage nor evidence that pre-existing structural problems were exacerbated by the storm.

Juan Ordonez, a structural engineer for the city, reiterated Friday that the stadium, built in 1963, is condemned nonetheless. He and other city officials say repairs could approach $4 million — and could be guaranteed only for 10 years. Luft says it might be possible to construct an entire new facility at close to the same cost.

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Some architects and engineers familiar with the stadium don't believe conditions there are so poor, however, that the stadium needs to be torn down. They blame the city for maintaining it poorly and one group of architects — the Miami-based nonprofit Rufus Nims Foundation — is even considering getting the stadium designated a historic property to halt demolition.

"I read the appraisal very carefully and I think it totally exonerates the stadium," said Miami architect Milton C. Harry, a board member of the Nims Foundation. "Any engineer who reads the report will tell you there is no basis for tearing it down. Somebody needs to blow the whistle on city officials.

"I run the stadium steps for exercise and have been watching the damn thing for years and I can tell you it's structurally sound."

John Nyitray, whose Miami firm helped design Joe Robbie Stadium and Camden Yards in Baltimore, also reviewed the appraisal and agrees with Harry.

"The report actually made the stadium sound like it's in better shape than I would have thought," said Nyitray, ~~treasurer of the Florida Coalition of American Structural Engineers.~~ "It needs work, but no concrete building that is fully exposed and sitting on the bay is going to be there for 30 years and not need repairs.

"I've always admired the stadium because I think it's an attractive, creative structure and think it can still be used for many years with minor repairs. I think it's definitely worth spending the money."

Paul Kelly, who appraised the stadium for the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Co., believes the stadium can be repaired. The question is more financial than it is feasible, he said.

"What it really boils down to is a question of economics, whether whatever revenue that's brought in by the facility justifies the cost of repairs," said Kelly, an engineer for Simpson Gumperts & Heger Inc. of Arlington, Mass. "If you are the city manager of Miami that's something you have to decide. That's what politicians get paid to do."

Odio and Luft don't think so.

"The site has proven itself as an unmatched venue for watersports competition and giving that up as an active component would be shortsighted and unfortunate," Luft said. "There are no other places to do the things we've done with marine stadium.

"But the question is how we can best utilize the property. If, after spending the money on repairs, you end up with a facility that is still obsolete, what do you do then?"